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Teaching Intercultural Communication Competencies as an International Student Cooperation Project - An Innovative Teaching Approach

Die Vermittlung interkultureller Kompetenzen im Rahmen internationaler studentischer Zusammenarbeit – ein innovatives Unterrichtsmodell

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Abstract (English)

This paper analyzes an innovative approach to train students in Germany and the francophone part of Switzerland in intercultural communication competencies. The teaching material has been created during a cooperation project between a university in Germany and one in Switzerland.

It deals with three different aspects: First, the learning and teaching approach, which is based on team learning experience described initially by Kolb (1984), the analysis of different intercultural subjects and upcoming critical incidents¹ in teams (Schumann 2012). In a second part, it treats the developed teaching and learning material including the guidelines to indicate tasks and exercises to the students, as well as the realization of the project by the students of both institutions. And third, the paper concludes with an evaluation analyzing in detail the students' opinion about the cooperation, what they liked or disliked, and which communication and working tools they applied.

The evaluation results show a great success in learning intercultural competence with this method even in larger groups, as well as in the use of new media to bridge the distance. Occurring cultural problems were solved within the teams and by coaching from the teachers' side, so that intercultural competencies and academic knowledge have been simultaneously developed during this group work.

Keywords: intercultural training, intercultural competence, higher education teaching approach, experimental learning, international student cooperation

Abstract (Deutsch)

Dieses Paper stellt einen innovativen Lehransatz für die Aneignung Interkultureller Kompetenz vor. Studierende aus Deutschland und der frankophonen Schweiz erarbeiteten sich im Rahmen eines kooperativen Lehrprojekts zwischen einer deutschen und einer schweizerischen Hochschule gemeinsam interkulturelle Kommunikationskompetenz. Bei diesem Konzept stand das grenzüberschreitende gemeinsame Lernen im Vordergrund, für das neue Materialien für Lehre und Teamarbeit entwickelt worden sind.

Dieser Artikel behandelt drei verschiedene Aspekte des verwendeten Lehrkonzepts: Zunächst geht er auf die theoretischen Grundlagen der verwendeten Lehr-Lern-Konzepte ein, wie sie beispielsweise im Team-Learning-Konzept (Kolb 1984) oder

bei der Analyse potenziell auftretender Critical Incidents in interkulturellen Teams (Schumann 2012) beschrieben werden. Im zweiten Teil werden die im vorliegenden Beispiel verwendeten Lehrmaterialien vorgestellt und analysiert, gemeinsam mit einer Beschreibung des Ablaufs der studentischen Teamarbeit.

Das Paper zeigt neben der besonderen Bedeutung neuer Medien bei der Überwindung größerer Distanzen in der Teamarbeit auch, dass der vorgestellte Ansatz für Teamprojekte im interkulturellen Lernen bei entsprechendem Coaching durch die Lehrenden auch für größere Gruppen erfolgreich umsetzbar ist. Dies wird durch die Ergebnisse im dritten Teil des Papers deutlich, der mehrphasige Evaluationen mit besonderem Schwerpunkt auf detaillierte Rückmeldungen der Studierenden zur Ausgestaltung und zum Ablauf des Lernprozesses darstellt.

Schlagwörter: Interkulturelle Kompetenz, Internationale Kooperation, Interkulturelle Hochschullehre, Lehr-Lern-Projekte, Erfahrendes Lernen, Affektives Lernen

1. Introduction

The best way to acquire the main recommended capacities to deal within an intercultural situation is to spend an extended time period abroad. But how can one still train the necessary capabilities while staying in the country or starting an international study program? Intercultural training is always more efficient when one experiences direct contact with people from another culture (Lüsebrink 2008), and when one experiences the aspects to learn (Kolb 1976). In this cooperation project students had to deal with many possible aspects of a stay abroad. This is what has been realized within this project on intercultural teaching and learning.

During the preparation for the winter semester 2012/13, two lecturers from a Swiss (French-speaking) and a German university² decided to co-design their upcoming classes in the fields of intercultural communication and management in order to expose their students to an applied approach to intercultural studies. Both student groups were part of a Bachelor program: The Swiss class was part of an International Management program, the German class was part of a program in Intercultural Communication. A project was developed that allowed students to work across countries in international teams on a research project and related essay. The main idea was to let the students experience international team work through a

distance-learning approach by means of a concrete intercultural example while having a clear task to fulfil and a time-frame to respect – a set-up which could possibly await them in their professional life or their upcoming education as well.

This paper documents the project and shows the results in its entirety, including frameworks, tasks and outcomes of a multi-layered evaluation at the end. Its focus lies on the challenges for the students as they were observed during the process and revealed during evaluation. It also will show how an international project with a similar set-up can help to teach and improve intercultural competence and therefore contributes a new concept to the discussion on intercultural teaching and learning.

An overview of intercultural teaching, competences and team learning will therefore be given in the following chapter. Then, the student groups will be characterized together with a presentation of the team work structure and materials. In the third part, the evaluations will be explained and put into an intercultural learning context.

2. Intercultural training and team learning – an overview

Intercultural communication training as a part of university courses is becoming an increasingly important field result-

ing from an internationalized student body and courses given in English as in many international degree programs (Schumann 2011:235). Intercultural learning is the concept to understand, integrate and apply impressions, thinking, values and actions of another culture into the own system of orientation (Thomas 1991:189). Intercultural knowledge and sensitivity is helpful for students while dealing with peers and teachers from different cultures, to complete traineeships and academic semesters abroad or to better understand literature or research approaches from foreign authors. To acquire this competence, the concept of intercultural learning with experimental strategies is a valuable approach (Bufe 1989, Thomas 1994). It means to learn by meeting people from other cultures. Another approach would be to compare cultures one to the other. As to intercultural learning by having contact with people from other cultures, Lüsebrink states that it is important, but until now not sufficiently developed, to reprocess one's experience after having been immersed in another culture (Lüsebrink 2012:66). More precisely, the stay abroad or the contact with people from other cultures is as important as the reflection of the experienced. All of these approaches lead to the aim of intercultural learning, which is to achieve so-called intercultural competence to deal with intercultural situations. This competence concerns different areas and is quite complex. Bolten explains four main areas that should be regarded when integrating an intercultural competence approach in management (Bolten 2006:9):

- a) A *(intercultural) professional competence*, which includes knowledge about technologies, markets, international experience and expert knowledge.
- b) A *(intercultural) strategic competence*, which includes problem-solving and organizational skills.
- c) An *(intercultural) individual competence*, which means a motivation to learn new things, tolerance, and pluralistic thinking.

- d) The *(intercultural) social competence*, which includes the ability to work in teams, empathy, tolerance and a sense for initiatives.

In addition, Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) state that interest, sensitivity and willingness to change the own behaviour are fundamental criteria for intercultural competence:

"To be effective in another culture, people must be interested in other cultures, be sensitive enough to notice cultural differences, and then also be willing to modify their behavior as an indication of respect for the people of other cultures." (Bhawuk / Brislin 1992:416)

According to Schumann, the *culture awareness* of the students is not much developed by itself, and therefore a tool is needed to train intercultural awareness of students (Schumann 2011:236). Such a tool could be a special course or project within the degree programs focusing especially on developing cultural awareness. As shown by several authors, in a university context, intercultural communication has the following different components (Schumann 2011, Mehlhorn 2005, Leenen / Groß 2007):

- a) The way people interact in daily communication,
- b) The way people communicate (write/present) scientifically,
- c) The way people communicate related to their field of study,

which could be treated either theoretically or practically during lessons.

As one way to train students in cultural awareness, Schumann uses *critical incidents*, that is detailed cases where people describe intercultural misunderstandings, irritation or critical situations. This approach allows for a detailed view of what they felt and how they resolved conflicts and situations in an intercultural environment. While those findings are individual cases which are not statistically representative, they show the reality as well as the complexity of a certain intercultural communication situation. For Schumann, the analysis

of these cases helps students to acquire a self-awareness of their own cultural habits and ways of thinking (Schumann 2011:239). In her view, these cases facilitate the development of a capacity to interact in intercultural communication situations and therefore avoid intercultural conflicts (Schumann 2011:236). Therefore, one aspect of the international teaching project was the work with critical incidents and case studies. In addition, the project described later in this article was based on the *Team-learning Experience* concept. Initially, the team-learning approach has been developed by Kolb (1984) building on his theory of experimental learning, and further developed in Kayes and Kolb's guideline Team-learning Experience (Kayes et al. 2004). For Kolb, each individual has its own way of learning and remembering the information obtained. Therefore, learning is a process that progresses individually (Kolb 1976). Kolb defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984:38). According to Kolb, the Learning Style Inventory (LSI)³ shows how a person learns, treats and resolves conflicts and problems, and how someone is arranging daily situations (Kolb 1981). Kolb divides the learning dimensions into four categories: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. The first category, learning from experience, means that people have a tendency to learn with their feelings. The second category, learning by reflecting, describes how people learn by seeing. The third category is learning by abstracting concepts, where people have a tendency to learn while thinking, and in the fourth category people tend to learn by doing. Based on this model, Kayes and Kolb developed the Team-learning Experience tool, where team-experience is structured to achieve successful learning (Kayes et al. 2004). In their team-learning module, Kayes et al. take into account the learning styles, the learning space, as well as the learning adaptability, which describes the degree of flexibility during a learning process (Kayes et al. 2004).

Also other researchers found aspects similar to Kolb's with respect to learning. Already Jonassen and Grabowski stated that learning is a process based on former experiences (Jonassen / Grabowski 1993), which is, unfortunately, individual. And later, Barmeyer takes these results to continue his research in learning theories. Barmeyer puts Kolb's theory in relation to a cultural level, comparing learning styles according to differences in culture. According to Barmeyer, learning is a *socializing process*, where the *way of learning* is depending on cultural backgrounds (Barmeyer 2000, 2004). Barmeyer states that "In the heart of all learning lies the way in which experience is processed, in particular, the critical reflection of experience" (Barmeyer 2004:580). And experience is always a cultural one, for example depending on where we went to school and university (see also Dubar 1991). Barmeyer's study found out that "learning styles are culture-bound cognitive schemes. When managers from different cultures communicate and work together in multinational teams or training situations, different learning styles meet, influencing both learning and working" (Barmeyer 2004:591).

In the following chapter, the course concept and material will be described in more detail.

3. Concept, material used and evaluation

In this chapter, the student body, the concept of our course, the material used, and finally the different evaluation stages and their results will be presented. The evaluations measure the concept of the course on a general level (evaluation of students and how they liked the course), the collaboration between students (how they estimated their collaboration between students on a distance level), and finally the lecturers' perspectives in Switzerland and Germany on behalf of this international and intercultural teaching project.

3.1. The study programs and student body in Germany and Switzerland

The course took place during the winter term 2012/2013 in Germany and Switzerland. On the German side, the term started on October 22nd, 2012, and ended on February 8th, 2013. The winter term in Switzerland took place from September 20th, 2012, until January 17th, 2013, and students of both universities cooperated during the period from October 22nd, 2012, to December 14th, 2012, in teams.

In Germany, the students participated in the course *Interkulturelles Management* taught in German, which required French and English reading knowledge. Languages mainly spoken by the students were German, French, English and Spanish. The student body consisted of several study programs, for example *Bachelor (B.A.) in French Cultural Studies and Intercultural Communication*, *Bachelor (B.A.) in German-French cross-border studies*, *Master of Management*, and other related fields. For some students this course was a mandatory part of their study program, while for others it was an optional course. All of them studied full-time and were in their second year of studies (third semester), or at most in their third year of their bachelor program (fifth semester) and between 20 and 27 years old, with a few exceptions regarding the Master students in Management who took the class by choice in addition to their usual program. Most of the students had a solid knowledge base in Intercultural Communication theories due to courses passed during their first years of study.

On the Swiss (French speaking) side, students participated in the course *Intercultural Communication I*, which was part of their study program as a mandatory course. They were enrolled in an international study program called *Bachelor (B.Sc.) of Business Administration with a Major in International Management*, which was taught in English. Languages mainly spoken were English, French, Spanish, some German and other languages like Russian, Chi-

nese, Portuguese, and Arabic. Students were in their first year of their Bachelor program, and therefore in their first semester. Some studied full time, some part-time due to regular jobs. The age of the students ranged from 20 to 30 years. As students were in their first year of study, they had no or little management knowledge and had never heard of Intercultural Communication theories before.

3.2. The course concepts

The course was mainly about training in Intercultural Communication competencies in the area of business and management. As explained before, students had different knowledge concerning these different domains. Therefore, each lecturer had chosen a different theoretical approach to prepare students in that field. The main objective was to train the intercultural competence in theory and practice via distance collaboration in Germany and Switzerland (French-speaking part) and by discussing intercultural subjects to deal with in teams.

In the given project, mainly four different teaching approaches were combined:

The first one is a lecture-based approach, in this case lecturing on theory of intercultural management and some integrated exercises. For this, German and Swiss classes pursued their program separately, which means that the respective lecturer decided, depending on the students' knowledge level, the content. In Germany, the lecturer aimed to combine intercultural behaviour theories with a business context to complete their knowledge and prepare them for teamwork. Theories to which students were introduced focused on cultural learning, communication theories, analyzing situations of intercultural interaction, cultural dimensions, intercultural training methods, intercultural competence, intercultural marketing and intercultural human resources management. On the other hand, students in Switzerland were exposed to the basic theories of intercultural communication like Bennett (2003), Hofstede (1997), Hall

(1990) and Lüsebrink (2012) as well as teamwork concepts (Kolb 1985, 2000, Kayes et al. 2004, Kolb et al. 2004) to prepare the project and to create a solid knowledge base in this field.

The second approach included work with the Team-learning Manual by using parts of the manual from Kayes et al. (2004). This was done for example by preparing students with a questionnaire that helped to become clear about their aims to reach before starting a team-work project. One question was for example about how to distribute tasks within a team: the team roles. As to Kayes and Kolb: "Whenever possible, team roles are based on member talents and preferences" (Kayes et al. 2004:28). Role preferences are personal experience, individual preferences, education and training, and skills and abilities (Kayes et al. 2004:28-29).

Swiss students were guided to organize in teams and therefore prepared for the project. In Germany, students had to organize the team-learning outside of their lectures, as team-learning was not a part of the syllabus.

The third approach, Kolb's concept regarding the intercultural team approach, was introduced by creating international teams for the project. Teams consisted of four to five participants, ideally at least two from each country. They worked on a project with clearly defined deadlines and a guideline, describing the aim and expected results of each team, but giving liberty concerning organization and approaches. During teamwork, the international teams had to work on and compare an intercultural communication or management project.⁴ The project was treated as an intercultural subject to do research on (Intercultural Training, Intercultural Marketing Analysis, and Critical Incidents⁵) and a paper had to be written in teams to also have a tangible outcome. The aim of the project was for the students to concentrate on common and different perspectives of their related subjects. Groups were built as soon as the semester in Germany had started, and materials such as guidelines, examples or literature were made available on the online platform

of each university. The materials and guidelines were developed jointly by the German and Swiss lecturer. The idea was to provide some material to help teams start their project off in a certain direction, but keeping the main part of the research as their task. It was considered important to use German and Swiss materials, articles, resources and examples in at least German, French and English so that every group member would find at least some materials in a language he/she knew. As a final work exam, teams had to write a paper of four to five pages on their subject describing the results of their research. The paper had to be written in English and respect a classical paper structure. During the teamwork phase, each lecturer organized two consultation hours per team in total (additional to the group meetings without the lecturer scheduled by the groups themselves), where students had to present the current results and explain their way of organizing their work. These meetings were also used to clarify difficulties encountered during the collaboration with team partners in the other country or content-related questions.

Subjects the teams worked on were selected jointly by the two lecturers. In 21 teams, each team was assigned to a different subject, although some teams worked in the same area, for example critical incidents or print advertisements, as the following table shows (Tab. 1):

The fourth component was the evaluation of the teamwork. After having completed the teamwork, students peer-evaluated the project. For this, the evaluation model of Kayes et al. (2004) has been used with additional questions concerning positive and negative feelings during the project as well as intercultural impressions of the participants.⁶

As another part of the evaluation, the grading of student's results was done differently per country due to organizational aspects. In Germany, the students' teamwork task was evaluated as *passed/not passed* without a grade. Only students that passed could complete the

N°	Subject
1	Implicit and explicit communication within foreign language situations (with critical incident case studies)
2	Comparison of higher education systems (e. g. elite higher education as a reason for cultural differences in working styles)
3	Expatriate cultural adjustment (cultural shock)
4	Challenges of time – punctuality, meetings and planning in an intercultural context (with critical incident case studies)
5	Interculture – the ‚in between’ of a new ‚relational culture’ during cultural meetings. What is interculture, of what does it consist and how does it work?
6	Cultural differences of the relation between professional and private life (with critical incident case studies)
7	Evaluation of role behavior in a cultural context (e. g. the role of chefs; with critical incident case studies)
8	Cultural differences of group values - individual and collectivistic thinking and the impact on family life and business (with critical incident case studies)
9	Training methods for outgoing expatriates I (culture-specific methods / practical guides, language courses, ‚culture courses’ etc.)
10	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy I – cars
11	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy II – beauty products
12	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy III – organic food
13	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy IV – technical products (e. g. cameras)
14	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy V – transport
15	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy VI – new & renewable energies
16	Comparison of higher education systems (e. g. elite higher education – as a reason for cultural differences in working styles)
17	Challenges of time - punctuality, meetings and planning in an intercultural context (with critical incident case studies)
18	Cultural differences of the relation between professional and private life (with critical incident case studies)
19	Cultural differences of group values – individual and collectivistic thinking and the impact on family life and business (with critical incident case studies)
20	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy III – food (chocolate)
21	Comparison of different products and their marketing strategy IVb – technical products (e. g. cameras)

Tab. 1: Subjects for the teamwork tackled by students from Germany and Switzerland.

entire course by taking a written exam at the end of the term. In Switzerland, students' grades were based 50% on the teamwork and 50% on a final written exam testing the knowledge of theories. The evaluation criteria of the project were the following:

- A sound analysis of the team's subject based on an intercultural perspective,
- The respect of the formal and content-related paper structure indicated in the guideline (see above),
- The intermediate presentations during the two scheduled consultation hours,
- The overall impression of the cooperation between students of the German and Swiss university over the whole period (from October 20th, 2012, to December 14th, 2012).

3.3. Course material

During the course five different types of material were used: a list of teams and subjects to work on, a general guideline for all students, some specific guidelines individually adapted to the subject of each team, and literature and material to analyze for example print advertisements or critical incident cases.

First of all, a list of the teams had been established, where their subject and team partners were stated. In this list, it had been mentioned where to find additional documents and which ones were specific for their team. Students had been divided into 21 teams where most of the teams consisted of three to four German and two to three Swiss students. The general guideline was jointly developed by the two lecturers of the collaboration project. It described all details of the concept (see chapter 3), the course plan, tasks, and how they were to be evaluated and graded (see Exh. 1 and 2).

In addition to the general guideline an individual guideline had been developed to support student collaboration. These guidelines explained in short the tasks of each specific group and their related subject. For instance, for a team that had been tasked with analyzing print advertisements for the same products from different countries, it was indicated that the ads should be analyzed by each member of the team individu-

Guideline Teamwork (4-6 Students per Team)

Cooperation between

2012/2013

Name of the professors:

Ms. Julia FRISCH
Ms. Gerlinde KRISTAHN

Teamwork

- Your team should work on the comparison of an intercultural communication/management subject
- Please concentrate on common and different perspectives of each team partner and detail the results of your discussion
- Subjects are distributed in the 1st session of the semester
- The beginning of the semester in
- The beginning of the semester in
- Contacts of your partner group in either Germany or Switzerland will be delivered as soon as the German Semester starts (around October 22nd 2012)
- Some of the material you need like the cases and some literature is on the platform
- Some additional resources have to be searched on your own. This is considered part of your work.
- The information you need has to be gathered in Switzerland and Germany and other countries if needed.
- Cooperation & participation at the teamwork (Germany & Switzerland) is mandatory to pass this part of the course

1

10/10/2012

Contact hours during your Teamwork

- Each group has to present intermediate results and their planned proceedings via the given consultation hours. The presentation is expected to take about 5-10 minutes
- Your group has to make a personal appointment during the given consultation hours below
- Please bring:

Tuesday	06.11.2012	10.00 – 13.00h	
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- Presentation of the project status, Project plan (how you are going to proceed) & Literature you are going to use

Thursday	06.12.2012	11.00 – 13.00h	
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- Presentation of the project status, your research methodology (how you proceeded) & research results so far

Structure of the Written Paper (4-5 pages maximum)

- Introduction**
(¼ - ½ page) = introduce the context of your subject
- Literature review**
(½ - 1 page) = Please describe/resume the literature that you used to make your analysis
- Research results**
(3 pages)
 - Methodology**
explain shortly what kind of methodology you applied, and how you received your results
 - Results**
Describe the results of your research done related to your subject
- Conclusion** (½ page)
resume your research, and give a critical outlook (in objective words) about your subject and future perspectives.

2

10/10/2012

Exh. 1: General guideline for the students, part 1.

ally, and then discussed in the group. Each point of view was to be taken into account and to be mentioned when writing down the results of the teamwork. The idea was that they would find common and/or different points of view for the same example. Students also received a recommendation to have a look at Hall's High-Context-/Low-Context-Theory to find clues and explain the differences between the national ads (Hall 1976). As another example, one group worked on explaining and developing intercultural training methods. In their guideline, instructions on how to work on that subject were given. They had to adapt the theories into a more concrete situation: How could someone be trained and prepared before going to Switzerland or Germany?

The following example shows the specialized guidelines given to the group working on critical incidents connected to explicit/implicit communication styles (Exh. 3):

Attachments
please add your analyzed material, graphics and other useful information

Bibliography
Please cite scientifically correctly all resources you mentioned in your paper

Deadline

- 14.12.2012, 4 pm**
- The finalized paper in teams of HEG and UDS students has to be send by mail to
 - gerlinde.kristahn@ and
 - j.frisch@

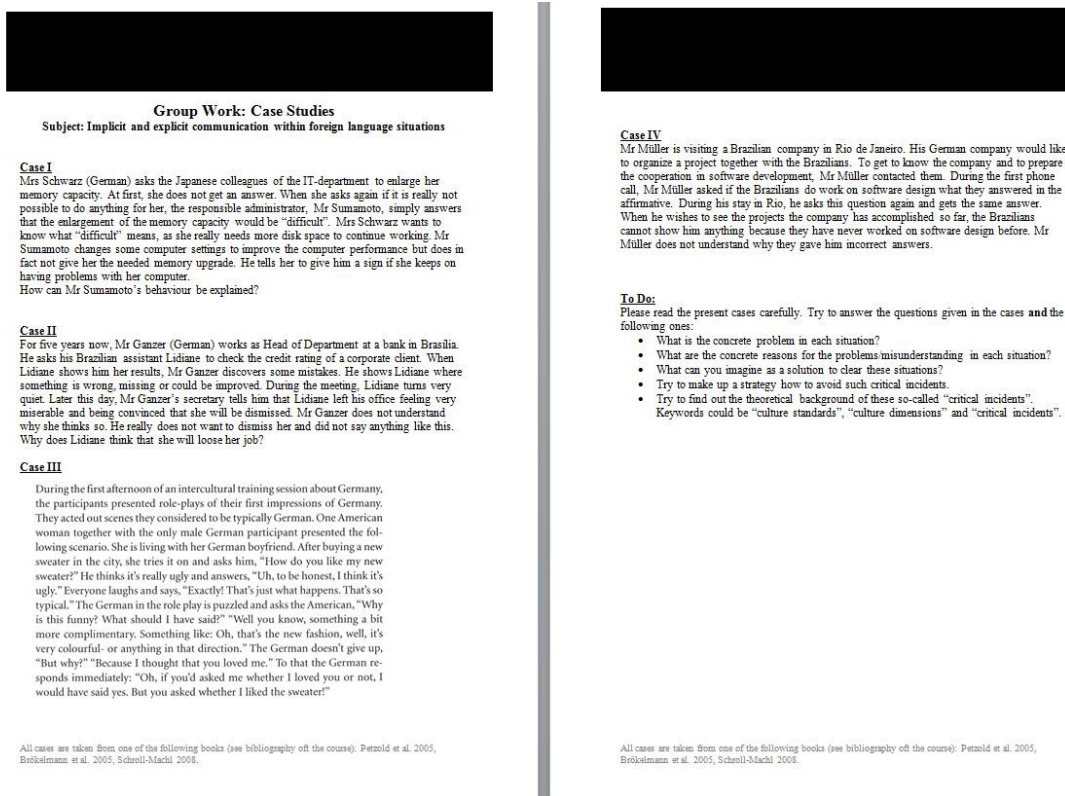
Evaluation Criteria per team J. FRISCH & G. KRISTAHN

- The success of the cooperation between students over the whole period (20 October 2012 – 14 December 2012)
- The respect of the paper structure indicated in this guideline (see above)
- A founded analysis of your subject in an intercultural perspective
- The intermediate presentations during the two scheduled consultation hours

3

10/10/2012

Exh. 2: General guideline for the students, part 2.



Exh. 3: Case study guideline: Implicit and Explicit Communication.

For this group, four critical incident cases were given to illustrate the subject, followed by a list of questions that would be helpful for analyzing these cases and to have a point to start from. In addition, readings were uploaded on the online platform or placed on reserve in the library. Literature ranged from the one used during theory sessions to the ones relevant for the teamwork phase. This selection by the two lecturers was not exhaustive; teams were encouraged to take additional cases into account. The provision of a couple of components helped to show students in which direction their work could go.

3.4. Evaluation of the project

First, after completing the task and submitting their papers to the lecturers, students from both universities were asked to answer an evaluation questionnaire about their group work experience. This questionnaire had been developed by the lecturers based on Kayes' and Kolb's concepts (Kayes et al. 2004). It contained questions on working techniques, communication channels used by the group as well as positive and negative aspects of the tasks and the working

process. It also included questions about their personal opinion of international group work as a part of their course.

Second, student papers were evaluated and graded by the lecturers considering notes taken during the group work process, which were based on the compulsory consultation hours that each national group attended twice during teamwork sessions, as well as further information collected through other advisory services given additionally (e. g. via phone calls, emails or individual consultation meetings).

In a third step, both lecturers reviewed the project regarding teamwork separately focusing on the impact on the students' intercultural competences and their cooperative behaviour as such, and on the educational outcome of the project, e. g. content of the papers and intercultural learning experience.

3.4.1. Students evaluation results

The questionnaire offered a possibility for the students to express their own view on several aspects of the group work, and to reflect their intercultural experience. For reasons of different

course sizes and unequal response rates, the number of answered questionnaires is $n=26$ for the Swiss course and $n=53$ for the German course. The questions allowed only for free text answers so that multiple elements could be mentioned by each student (or none at all) and were formulated in English. For the summary, answers were collected in sections, so that the statements “We started the teamwork by exchanging email addresses” and “We tried to find each other on Facebook” as answers to the first question were summed up in the section “Organizing the exchange (Facebook, mailing list, Skype)”.

The answers to the first question show that the main focus of the students during the first steps was to organize the data exchange via internet and to share their first ideas on how to split up the workload and on the subject in general. Only a small number of students decided to work through available information first before splitting up tasks. It is interesting to see that one Swiss student chose to write a rough paper draft as the first thing to do, while one German student found it appropriate to create a concept paper and send that to the Swiss group members. From the lecturers’ perspectives, these two answers are somehow surprising as they show an uncommon approach to a teamwork task where a discussion of concepts or timetables together with the whole group tends to be more usual. In doing so, the two students may have caused irritations by sidestepping the other group members at this important step of the project, as further evaluation results suggest. Unfortunately, as the questionnaire had been answered anonymously, it cannot be inferred from these answers if the following cooperation has been negatively influenced by these courses of action. Nevertheless, chapter 3.4.2 will provide more insights into this question, as students talked about the details of their collaboration to the lecturer during the consultation hours.

Question two highlights the differences in previously gained knowledge. As already explained, the Swiss group consisted of first term students while the

Q1: How did your team start the group work?		
Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Splitting the work / organizing the tasks	5	18
Brainstorming / sharing ideas	18	15
Organizing the exchange (Facebook, mailing list, Skype)	17	53
Setting up deadlines / timetable	2	0
Presenting own country/culture	2	0
Reading given information	5	6
Researching additional information	0	4
Writing a first draft	1	0
Elaborating a concept and send it to the Swiss	0	1

Tab. 2: Questionnaire results, question no. 1.

Q2: How did your team share past experiences (with topic or group work)?		
Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
No / not enough past experiences	0	3
No sharing of such experiences	8	5
Exchange via group discussions	7	12
Germans / Swiss did not share enough	1	4
Talking about classes, known literature and information from the web	1	26
Germans were more experienced	1	1
Collection of information, then sharing with the group	14	12

Tab. 3: Questionnaire results, question no. 2.

German group was made up of students from third and fifth terms. This explains why 26 students from the German university could share their knowledge from past classes and scientific literature with their Swiss peers. Nevertheless, only one German and one Swiss candidate clearly stated this difference in knowledge in their answer. As the subjects also came up in a more detailed way in answers to other questions, students obviously have focused on different aspects of teamwork replying to this question. In general, question two shows that the students started with

Q3: How did your team organize its ideas?**Did you have a plan or a model that you followed?**

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Dividing into subtopics	6	17
Building mixed subgroups	0	2
Building national subgroups	2	4
Plan or timetable was followed	15	10
No plan or model	0	4
Using the suggested structure	1	12
Setting up own structure	3	3

Tab. 4: Questionnaire results, question no. 3.

Q4: How did your team reach a final decision on actions to take?**Did everyone agree on the team's decisions?**

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
No problem with making decisions	15	29
Made compromises and came to good solutions	6	4
Final decisions were discussed together (Skype, email...)	6	2
Waited for decision by the lecturers	1	0
Not enough discussions	1	4
Swiss and Germans discussed separately and then shared thoughts	4	4
One / several leaders took main decisions	0	7
Lots of problems and misunderstandings in organizing	0	6
No real cooperation / heavy imbalance in work load	0	6

Tab. 5: Questionnaire results, question no. 4.

Q5: In which stage did your team spent most of the time?**What happened in this stage?**

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Writing the final version of the paper	8	13
Literature research / review	7	11
Discussing the start	3	11
Analyzing cases and resuming results (of cases / subtopics)	2	12
Communication	1	0
Waiting for the Swiss to answer emails	0	4

Tab. 6: Questionnaire results, question no. 5.

collecting information and sharing the results within the group, e. g. recently researched material or past experiences from classes, literature or the web.

Regarding internal organization of teams, most groups preferred to set a timetable or plan and divided their task into subtopics. Six students declared having set up a new personal structure for work, while 13 reported to have followed the suggested structure mentioned in the guideline. Only a few students wrote about how subgroups were structured. Therefore, one cannot infer from the data that they mainly preferred to organize in national or mixed groups to work on singular subtopics. The analysis of the presentations given during the mandatory consultation hours provides more insights into this topic.

Question four shows that in most of the groups, decisions were jointly taken and approved, also when compromises had to be discussed. Only in a few cases a group leader (or multiple ones) took the main decisions. As a negative experience, six students stated that the organization did not work out well due to misunderstandings or imbalances in the work load, sometimes as a result of a lack of team-wide discussions in general. One Swiss student waited for his/her lecturer to take a final decision. These statements show that most of the groups had no or no serious trouble with sorting out their proceedings and decisions, with some exceptions regarding communication problems or the working atmosphere in a minority of teams.

Question five shows harmonized results on both sides, taking into consideration the unbalanced participation rate of the questionnaire. The majority of participants spent most of their time "writing the final version of the paper" followed by literature research and review, discussions about how to proceed at the beginning and the analysis of the respective subtopics like for example the critical incident cases. One Swiss student named communication in general as most time-consuming, and four members of the German group held the email practice of their Swiss colleagues

responsible for most of the time spent during teamwork as they often had to deal with delayed answers. It is more than probable that there is a link to the answers in the previous question stating problems in communication and organization.

Regarding question six, students mentioned the different stages of writing the paper as the shortest stages of the project, while dispersing the tasks and settling an action plan was mentioned even more often. These results suggest that for most of the groups, the project's content was more challenging and time-consuming as the organizational tasks. This is interesting to read as the opposite would have been a valuable outcome, too: The distance, the language or cultural differences in time perception or team work strategies could have been a greater challenge than the content of the tasks. The results of this question clearly show that this was not the case here.

The main result of question seven was that many students were satisfied by the team spirit and communication and by the fact of working in a multicultural environment itself. Achieving a task by using several languages, brainstorming and collecting (culturally) different points of view were also mentioned as positive aspects, and some Germans most appreciated to see the final paper as a result of their efforts. Unfortunately, one student from Switzerland found nothing positive to cite.

The last question concerned negative aspects of the teamwork experience. Aspects mentioned the most were communication problems, followed by difficulties to respect the personal timetables of all group members while planning discussions and deadlines, and the differences in knowledge on how to deal with a project in a scientifically approved way also seemed to be difficult. This last point has been evoked before in the first question and should be taken into consideration for future cooperation projects by giving clearer advice on scientific writing or by creating groups where the members have similar knowledge of these formal topics. While in the previous question a

Q6: In which stage did the team spend the least time? Please give examples of what happened in this stage.

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Arranging the duties	6	8
Writing the introduction	1	7
Writing the methodology	1	3
Writing the paper	3	4
Writing the conclusion	2	4
Searching for material (easy to find)	4	2
Drawing the concept of the paper/ the group work	1	11
First contact / introducing ourselves	4	2
Only few contact during the middle stage (working on subtopics)	1	4

Tab. 7: Questionnaire results, question no. 6.

Q7: Are there any aspects of your teamwork that you consider very positive?

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Seeing the result after all the work	0	5
Bringing together lots of ideas	4	6
Good team spirit / communication within the team	15	16
Working in a multicultural team	4	14
Communication in different languages	1	9
The meetings with the lecturers	0	3
Working via distance	2	3
Getting to know people from other countries	2	0
Motivation	1	2
Insight of different cultural views on topics and organization	4	1
"Not really"	1	0

Tab. 8: Questionnaire results, question no. 7.

few students confirmed that they liked working via long-distance, more group members would have preferred a possibility to meet each other during the project. And as a last aspect, differences in personal motivation and effort during the project were negatively observed by a few students.

Q8: Are there any aspects of your teamwork that you consider very negative?

Given Answers	Swiss Group (number of mentions)	German Group (number of mentions)
Problems with the communication	5	13
Different time schedules were difficult to be taken in consideration	3	7
Different knowledge of how to work scientifically	0	8
No grades for Germans	2	3
Not every group member made the same effort	1	7
Guideline was too strict	0	2
Guideline was not strict enough	0	3
Problems with group atmosphere	2	4
No possibility to meet	1	7
Contact stopped directly after having finished the paper	0	1
"None"	9	0

Tab. 9: Questionnaire results, question no. 8.

Overall, the peer-evaluation results show that most of the students were satisfied with the project itself, the cooperation and the outcomes. A few problems appeared as it was to be expected from the start. They were mostly related to time or communication issues, but while they should be taken into consideration for designing and guiding future projects, they do not challenge the project's outline itself. Quite to the contrary, the students were not only positive about it, but also able to deal with the challenges of the teamwork in a very reflecting way.

3.4.2. Lecturers' review of the project

Apart from peer-evaluation both lecturers evaluated the project in several ways. During two sessions called consultation hours, where students met their lecturer per team, Swiss and German students talked about different aspects of their teamwork and presented their intermediary results. The first part of the meetings concerned the project itself and related administration, while the second

part dealt with the relation between team members and challenges they faced trying to manage their working relationship over distance. During these meetings the lecturers gave advice and took notes on every group consisting of upcoming problems, things that worked well, the progress made by the teams and their impression of group dynamics. This part describes the notes taken by the lecturers during these consultation hours.

- a) One aspect during these meetings stated by Swiss students was that they had to discuss the scientific definitions with their German counterparts, because they were not always evident to them. Some groups emphasized that they agreed with the German team on some issues, for example on how to proceed, the time frame that should be respected, the organization of tasks or the subject to work on. This leads to an aspect that has often been discussed during the meetings: the way the teamwork was organized among the groups. Three types of organization could be identified: The first way was to divide the work into sub-topics, like particular case studies or texts. For the second scenario, one Swiss and one German student built a tandem for one case, or they shared all the cases and at the end analysed their individual results together. And the third organization form was to analyze the data all together, which was the most common one. For the last scenario, every team member had a close look at the data and therefore everyone had the possibility to discuss it. Especially groups that had a more theoretical project topic started their collaboration with reading the texts, and some had to do complementary research before they could start. Students were instructed to make a project plan in the beginning, but only 1/3 of the Swiss students made one, compared to 2/3 on the German side.
- b) Another interesting observation was that a few teams widened their topic: They chose additional countries for

their comparison of advertisements or higher education systems like the United Kingdom, Belgium, Japan, France, Spain, Portugal and Russia. This had not been expected by the lecturers but these students wanted a) to get more impressions on their topic and to apply their researched theories on more examples and / or b) to involve the cultural/family background of a group member.

- c) As a third aspect, the scientific outcome of the project itself was considered, i. e. the results the students obtained about their related subject they worked on in international teams. Swiss Students stated three main issues. First, some said that in German and Swiss advertisements there was much more information to be found about the product, whereas in France, advertisements were more emotional. Second, some Swiss students figured out different perspectives with the German students. They considered having different ideas and did not always see the same things by interpreting the same issue. One group stated that their ideas seemed to be influenced by a *cultural factor*. Third, some Swiss subgroups stated that most of the ideas were the same between them and German students.
- d) Another result lecturers observed was that in the German group, some subjects discussed during the consultation hours were identical to the Swiss ones, but not all of them. Some students thought that it was very interesting to learn about different points of view on the given topics. For example, the team working on implicit/explicit communication styles stated to have had interesting discussions on varieties of politeness or on how to express questions, as this was a field where differences between Switzerland and Germany rapidly became obvious. The team working on educational systems could easily draw from their own experience in their home countries and abroad and gave examples contextualizing

the otherwise theoretical subject. Personal experiences also shaped the teams' view while working on cultural shocks, so that both groups started sharing their memories from time spent abroad (e. g. student or school exchange programs or au-pair jobs) and then developing hypotheses before researching literature on this topic.

- e) Concerning the relationships and communication in teams, Swiss students stated that they mainly communicated via Skype⁷ and email to establish the first contact. Nearly all of them confirmed that Skype was a very successful way to communicate and resolve any problems of potential misunderstandings. Many teams set up Facebook⁸ groups to communicate, and some used WhatsApp.⁹ To fix times for meetings and Skype sessions, Doodle¹⁰ was utilized to handle the different time schedules of the team members, while documents were often exchanged via Dropbox.¹¹ The languages spoken were mainly French or English, some preferred using Spanish as a working language.
- f) Swiss Students remarked positive and negative aspects when communicating via distance with their German counterparts. Some teams recalled that the first contact was good or very good. Most of the teams started their collaboration by introducing themselves to the other students; some even exchanged some previous experience of things they had heard about Switzerland, Germany or the two university locations. The frequencies of exchange were individually different, but most of the teams stayed in contact at least once per week. A few Swiss students complained about German team members not answering their email requests (at least sometimes). One team even arrived very angry at the consultation hour because it felt overwhelmed: The Germans had quite quickly organized and presented a fully developed project plan. The Swiss part of the team had

the impression that they could not intervene anymore and that they had to follow the German proposition. In another case, a German group pointed out that they had to do everything on their own because the Swiss partners did not answer their emails during the first three weeks. After the first consultation meeting, the communication improved within many teams. Overall, more than half of the teams encountered little problems at some point during their collaboration and except for one team all of them were able to resolve these issues and managed to realize substantial work. The infrastructure of having a common guideline and regular meetings with the lecturers helped some teams, and many teams managed their issues without any intervention from the lecturers' side.

- g) Regarding the papers reviewed by both lecturers, the outcome was mainly good to very good, with a few excellent papers and only two that passed but lacked content and/or methodological diligence. The main issues were a disregard of formal criteria, e. g. number of pages or misinterpretation of *literature review* (not just to list literature found). The majority of papers showed qualified results and interest for the subject, and most of the papers could be read without recognizing parts where authors had changed. As for the language, most of the students on both sides had not written scientific texts in English before, but smaller essays or term papers in German or French or no papers at all. Yet, almost every paper was written in a clear and understandable way (except for one that also the team was not satisfied with, because it was somehow incongruent and not proofread for grammar) – a German student explained that in her team, one member had spent one year in the U.S. as an au-pair and therefore engaged herself in proofreading, while other teams discussed formulations with the help of online dictionaries. Given the fact

that before the project started many German students had been anxious about having to work in English, the language definitely did not prove to be a main challenge.

The members of the group which did not succeed to solve their internal problems remained unhappy until the end of the project and did not like the paper they wrote, as they considered it to be scientifically incorrect and badly written. They complained about a lack of time for reviewing it due to delayed submission of subchapters by one member: A situation that is familiar to lecturers when it comes to team work, international or not, and known to appear in a minority of cases. Nevertheless, only one team out of 21 failing the exercise completely does not weaken the very good impression of the papers and the procedures the teams designed.

3.4.3. Evaluation summary

In general, the students' perspectives matched the lecturers' perspectives: The self-assessment of the teams regarding the quality of papers, the main challenges of the group work itself and the positive aspects of the project (e. g. brainstorming together, getting to know culturally different points of view on a specific question and working in a foreign language) were perceived by the students and the lecturers in the same way. At some points some students needed help to find out if an occurring problem had a cultural or a personal background, which was mostly sorted out during the consultation hours.

The papers had good quality and even if some students from both countries stated that it was hard work to do and not always easy to organize concurrent to their other classes and/or jobs, the Swiss and the German classes were satisfied by having participated. Language issues have been solved quickly, and communication technologies helped in many ways to organize the teamwork.

In summary, the evaluation results are very positive and helpful for the conception of future projects. Aspects that showed a clear need for improvement

were facilitation of communication or different levels of previous knowledge. Those would need to be taken into consideration in the design of future projects.

4. Conclusion

First, the main outcome of intercultural learning was to build the contact and collaboration with students from another country. This criterion has been mentioned already in the theoretical part of this article, and would be part of the *intercultural individual competence* according to Bolten (2006). Even though Germany and Switzerland are geographically quite close, the language represented the first barrier as the students did not have the same mother tongue and therefore had to use foreign languages. Based on the results of the evaluations, one can argue that this challenge has been solved by all teams as a matter of course. They were willing to and capable of finding a common language like English, but some were open to communicate in German, French or Spanish. Another challenge was the cultural background, which is often underestimated between countries that are considered to be *close*. Some of the students even complained before starting the collaboration that they would have preferred to work with students from a more *exotic* country, but they quickly anticipated the challenge of a Swiss-German cooperation and found differences in organization, knowledge, language and behaviour to cope with. As students and also the lecturers mentioned, nearly every team experienced certain difficulties during collaboration, and in nearly all cases these difficulties could be solved relatively quickly and could be seen as efficient learning. Some of the difficulties can be explained by the distance itself or the teamwork, but some were obviously an underestimation of cultural differences. One example would be the Swiss team that was very angry because their German team members had proposed a project plan. They felt ignored and thought the German team did not consider their opinion. The German

team explained that they wanted to do them a favour by already realizing the first step of the collaboration. Another example was that a German group felt unhappy when it came to writing the paper together. They tried to reach their Swiss colleagues and heard that they had not finished their part of the research yet. The Germans thought that their Swiss peers were lagging behind and complained about it to their lecturer – and discovered soon after that the Swiss team members had not only collected the information needed, but already written a text summarizing and analyzing it. The Swiss had understood it as a part of their research task, while the Germans stopped after taking notes on their research, thinking that the writing process would be a new step. It is evident that both team parts had a different conception of what to do in this step and as they had not discussed it in the beginning just acted as they thought it to be *normal*.

Second, the team-learning approach was successful. Students learned how to deal with a team composed of members from their own country and from abroad. This intercultural team-learning was a learning experience in itself, because it represented the lived reality of the students. They managed the distance easily with modern technology, and especially Skype meetings helped to clarify misunderstandings and solve problems. Realizing a project with students they had never met only via distance represented a great challenge to all of them. Going through sometimes difficult phases in between, they came out of this experience very proud and successful. The different evaluations showed that nearly all teams were very happy to have managed it and had had a positive experience.

A third aspect was the theoretical learning about intercultural communication and intercultural management, which improved the *intercultural professional competence* (Bolten 2006). This aspect was taught by the lecturers, but was also part of the project to be realized in teams. Students managed the content very well, even though many of them had never heard of these subjects before.

Students took advantage of the fact that the teams had members who were in different stages of their study programs. This way they always had advanced students in each group to bridge this knowledge issue without complications.

The last aspect that completed their learning was an evaluation of the experienced international teamwork, as Lüsebrink (2012) recommends. Already during each consultation hour, students learned to talk about some experiences and find solutions with the lecturer. Additionally, they evaluated their work at the end of the project to revise what were good and negative aspects. This improves learning of intercultural competence, and helps to handle difficult aspects in further collaboration projects.

One can say that by realizing this teaching approach, many recommendations of former research regarding intercultural education are considered. As Barmeyer stated in his study (Barmeyer 2000, 2007), learning about and with people in another country at a university prepares students for their future professional life. Even though students did not go to another country, they were confronted with another education system, with students from another country, and received positive learning results regarding intercultural competencies.

As recommendation for similar projects, the following aspects should be taken into consideration:¹²

- It is helpful to have team members with similar knowledge of scientific working and writing practice, so that the teams do not have to spend too much time and effort in discussing and teaching themselves. If the standards are differing much due to varying years of study, a suggestion would be to provide a guideline with examples for citations or footnotes and to explain some details like plagiarism and how to deal with sources from the internet, newspaper articles or personal opinions.
- The group size per team should be kept small. With six people, the

maximum for such a project team seems to be reached. In general, teams that consisted of four or five members experienced fewer problems in communication or finding time for appointments.

- It is helpful if students in both countries are graded the same way. Due to obligatory details in the study regulations, this was not the case in the described project. It did not cause problems, but the German students thought it would be fairer to get a grade on the project as the Swiss did, instead of just passing the class.
- The compulsory consultation hours turned out to be very helpful. The lecturers got an impression of how the work proceeded and all groups had to present their positive and negative aspects. Therefore no team was left behind, and many questions could be clarified before causing trouble. The students also liked it, as they received continuous feedback and could discuss details when needed.

In conclusion, one can state that the collaboration project was a great success for the learning outcomes of students in intercultural competence. This learning approach, based on team-learning, international groups of students, theory in intercultural communication and collaboration via distance combines a number of recommendations currently discussed in the scientific community regarding intercultural training.

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Endnotes

1. A critical incident is a case that shows a conflict in an intercultural communication situation in its entirety.
2. The authors were asked not to state the university's name for reasons of confidentiality.
3. The Learning Style Inventory (LSI) is the outcome of research done by Kolb in 1981 that shows different preferences of learning styles by students.
4. See the subjects in Tab 1.
5. A critical incident is a case that shows a conflict in an intercultural communication situation in its entirety.
6. See all questions in chapter 3.4.1.
7. A software client for charge-free phone calls via internet.
8. An online platform for social networking.
9. A smartphone application for charge-free messages via internet.
10. An online service created by Google to find time slots suitable for all participants.
11. An online cloud sharing service.
12. When collaborating internationally, even within courses, not all conditions are the same. This is a normal aspect to take into account, and helps to show the reality of any other international cooperation that students will experience later in their professional life.

